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Kevin Kok-Yew TAN

Augustine PANG

Singapore Management University, augustine@smu.edu.sg

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Assessing the Use of Social Media for Employee Engagement in the Singapore Military

Kevin Kok-Yew Tan, Augustine Pang

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to assess the potential of using social media in employee engagement within the Singapore military through the theoretical lens of organizational listening, and to ascertain the implications to corporate organizational communication with the transferability of findings made possible by a common pool from which both military and corporate draw their employees. 20 interviewees with varied demographics were interviewed in this research. Findings showed that:

- Text messaging and social media were common communication platforms used for employee engagement;
- Employees feel proud when the organization showcases good work on social media;
- Social media use must be complemented by face- to- face interactions by the organization's leaders; and
- Employees want to feel valued from the communication efforts by their organization.

Beyond the Singapore military, corporate organizations can better understand the potential of social media as a communication platform for the workforce and the importance of coordinated, consistent, deliberate and strategic communication internally. This study is arguably one of the first to apply findings from military employee engagement research into the corporate settings. Organizations should be cognizant of the high informational and emotional needs of the Gen Y workforce within organizations. Theoretically, it calls for organizational communication theories like organizational listening to reinforce existing internal communication strategies in the current mediascape, which this research attempts to spearhead by mapping its findings against the seven tenets of organizational listening – Recognition, Acknowledgement, Attention, Interpretation, Understanding, Consideration, and Response.

KEYWORDS: Engagement, Organizational Communication, Mediascape

Kevin Kok-Yew Tan, MMC (TANK0228@e.ntu.edu.sg) is a Postgraduate Researcher at Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Augustine Pang, Ph. D. (augustine@smu.edu.sg) is a Professor of Corporate Communication (Practice) at Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University, Singapore

Introduction

Colin Luther Powell, a retired general from the United States Army once said: “The day the soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help them or concluded that you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership.” (Karabell, 2016). Opinion leaders in human resource management and organizational communication have used this quote to emphasize the importance of internal communications. With user-generated communication technologies revolutionizing information sharing and collaboration and triggering dramatic changes in social interactions and expectations for communication, employees might well stop bringing their problems to their bosses. Managers need to be even more proactive in listening and feeling the pulse on the ground given the ways social media have wrought changes in how communication is used. This study considers how effective employee engagement through communication technologies could lead to higher employee performance or work motivation, while assessing the potential of social media use for employee engagement through an analysis of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF).

Employees from the military and commercial organizations have similar communication needs – soldiers are just as vocal, require as much attention on their careers, and explore options through the internet and on social media (Snider, Priest, & Lewis, 2001). The potential of social media to influence the motivation of military employees, and the high internet penetration and data transfer rates in Singapore – which provide an ideal infrastructure for social media communication to flourish – attract this research to focus on an area with paucity of open literature. With social media dictating the speed of communication, there is an increasing demand to understand employees’ communication needs so as to better engage them.

Existing military employee retention literature mostly focus on factors like remuneration (Buddin & Kapur, 2002) and medical or physical requirements (Krueger, 2001), rather than employee engagement. This research examines employee engagement in a social-mediated environment and the Generation Y (Gen Y) characteristics within the workforce. Gen Y, or digital natives, are the first generation of users to be exposed to the digital environment since young (Bolton, Parasuraman, Hoefnagels, Migchels, Kabadayi, Gruber, & Solnet, 2013) – they dominate the current workforce (Solnet & Hood, 2008) and have raised the expectations for information (Lowe, Levitt & Wilson, 2008); thereby calling attention to how the nature of the audience affects this research on employee engagement in the social-mediated communication landscape.

Employee engagement has been defined as a driver of positive attitude, willingness to work, commitment to the organization’s success, passion, emotional attachment to the organization, and enthusiasm for improvement or innovation (Bakker, 2011; Schaufeli, 2013). While Macey and Schneider (2008) argued that there are diverse interpretations of employee engagement across the academia and practice, their proposition of the contextual interpretation of employee engagement (between psychological states, traits and behaviors) further motivates this research to investigate the indistinctness of the concept of employee engagement across literature

through organizational listening (Macnamara, 2016). Markos and Sridevi (2010) argued that effective employee engagement “is closely linked with organizational performance outcomes” (p. 94) and higher retention rates, which reinforce the motivation of this research to derive tactical pointers for managers to better engage their employees through social media. This study also extends the definition of perceived organizational support to include organizations giving employees the perception of fulfilling careers, addressing employees’ remunerative expectations, and displaying concern for their development and progress.

The military setting reflects the corporate employee environment as the Gen Y-dominated workforce continues to blur the divide, evident in the rising informational and emotional demands by SAF employees through this research. The findings across the microcosm of the military and corporate settings as seen in the interviews with both former and current employees from SAF also present the potential of employee engagement strategies to be extrapolated from military to the corporate world. This research offers a springboard into employee engagement in the corporate settings; its relevance will be explained.

Background

The military was chosen for its rich context for the study of human resource and communication practices, its size, diversity of personalities, and global perspectives (Smith, Holtom, & Mitchell, 2011). Singapore is one of the few countries in the world running a citizen army formed mostly by conscripts (Da Cunha, 1999), giving it the diversity of professional soldiers carving their military careers, and conscript soldiers who turnaround every two years. As part of the country’s Ministry of Defence (MINDEF), the SAF comprises the Singapore Army, the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) and the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN). National Service (NS), the country’s conscription policy that requires male citizens to enlist for a two-year military service upon turning 18, comes under MINDEF and the military forces.

While the SAF has its own communications offices to manage strategic and internal communications, employee engagement rests with military commanders and involves face-to-face communication, interviews, mentoring and regular emails. With a deeper penetration of social media in Singapore due to its developed infrastructure and networks, the SAF needs to review its employee engagement strategies. It has to tap into public communications and the reach of its communications offices across each of its service (Army, Navy and Air Force) to meet the engagement demands of the current generation of employees, and to mitigate inconsistent engagement efforts due to the personalities of military commanders. Across the prominent social media platforms which MINDEF and SAF are on, Facebook has the largest number of followers (see Table 1).

Table 1 Breakdown of Followers on Social Media

	MINDEF	Air Force	Army	Navy
YouTube	50,537	14	2,674	-
Facebook	121,197	220,349	140,724	143,061
Instagram	25,900	27,600	18,200	18,000
Twitter	8,127	3,997	3,356	-

Against the backdrop of existing internal communications guidelines in the SAF, military commanders in Singapore need the latitude to tap into social media to feel the pulse on the ground, and to capture the hearts of their subordinates in the public domain. Militaries like those of Australia and the US have been using social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to reach out and listen to both the public and their internal audiences (Mayfield III, 2011). With such precedence, the SAF should also deliberate its use of social media for internal communications, particularly to sense the sentiments of its employees by establishing its public communications and social media listening on these platforms.

Literature Review

Both corporate and military employees are drawn from the same pool, hence it is postulated that employee engagement strategies are transferable from corporate to military. This is particularly the case when the current workforce is dominated by Gen Y employees born between 1981 and 1999 who are accustomed to social networking sites (Bolton et al., 2013) and exhibit similar informational and communication needs.

Employee Engagement: Theoretical Lens

Organizational commitment and identity are essential outcomes of effective employee engagement. This paper argues that organizational listening – which is the “culture, policies, structure, processes, resources, skills, technologies and practices” an organization adopts to “give recognition, acknowledgement, attention, interpretation, understanding, consideration, and response to its stakeholders and publics” (Macnamara, 2015, p. 19) – can reinforce employee engagement. Organizational listening shows value and respect for the voices of stakeholders, whereby managers portray “overinvestment” (Shaw, Dineen, Fang, & Vellella, 2009, p. 1017) on the part of the employer to encourage better job performance and organizational identity. Overinvestments in employees also means organizational support and higher commitment from the organization without performance expectations. In a study with almost 20,000 employees, Porath (2015) found that respecting employees or upholding civility at work helps garner commitment and engagement from employees.

Each employee engagement model and strategy proposed comes with different sets of factors identified for employee engagement. In two quantitative studies conducted by Lloyd, Boer, Keller, and Voelpel (2015) on supervisor listening, it was found that positive listening experience or when supervisors listen, employees are likely to have lower turnover intentions,

be less emotionally exhausted, and exhibit stronger organizational citizenship behaviors. The cross comparison of the theories and strategies across literature put employee development, empowerment or respect, and active communication as the key strategies examined when applying them in the military context during interviews. These are tenets of organizational listening, which this research will draw reference from when presenting its findings.

Listening gives foundation for communicators to frame and put forth appealing messages to intended audience (Heath & Coombs, 2006). Effective listening enhances communication as it indicates the value and respect of opinions (Helms & Haynes, 1992), retains information better (Cooper, 1997), refines the context of communication, and enhances interpersonal impression (Cooper & Husband, 1993). Macnamara (2016) further argued that organizational listening reduces the impact of issues and crises, increases employee retention and loyalty, improves trust within organizations, and enhances engagement and participation. Organizational listening allows the building of trust among internal stakeholders by nuancing communications based on their needs. When internal stakeholders are convinced, valued and respected, they speak for and stand up for their organization. The tenets of organizational listening – *Recognition, Acknowledgement, Attention, Interpretation, Understanding, Consideration, and Response* – support engagement and retention (Macnamara, 2016) through the value and respect of stakeholders' voices.

Employees' perceptions are shaped by their environment, values and societal influences. By joining an organization, employees believe that the organization will fulfil the affective meanings within them, whether in terms of job recognition, remuneration or other aspects. When these are not maintained, they will start to drift away from the organization (Hogg, 2016). Organizational citizenship behavior, which refers to the discretionary individual behavior that promotes effective functioning of the organization without direct or explicit recognition by the formal reward system (Organ, as cited in Lloyd, Boer, Keller, & Voelpel, 2015), exceeds core obligations of employees to their organizations and have shown to be positively related to organizational success (Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994) including employee retention. While effective organizational listening alone cannot predict organizational commitment (Lobdell, Sonoda, & Arnold, 1993), it can forge strong organizational citizenship behaviors from employees (Lloyd *et al.*, 2015) as affective meanings and emotional expectations of value and respect are met.

With Gen Y's domination of the workforce and its expanded employee emotional needs (Yeaton, 2008), engagement strategies must adapt to the current social-mediated communication landscape. Saks (2006) highlighted the relation between employees' attitudes, intentions, and behaviors to job and organizational engagements, hinting that varying context could alter employee engagement effectiveness. Snider, Priest, and Lewis (2001) found that the differences lie in the organization and not employees, who are drawn from a common pool, and exposed to similar cultures and societal values. With both corporate and military employees exhibiting similar informational and emotional needs, definitions of employee engagement need to be sharpened with findings related to identity and meaning from organizational listening.

Curri van's (2000) findings that job satisfaction and organizational commitment are affected by organizational structure and individuals' personalities reinforced the argument that Gen Y employees have a higher propensity to leave the job if they are unsatisfied (Lowe, Levitt, & Wilson, 2008). Penna (2007) argued that remuneration is not the key to employee retention, and proposed the focus on listening to employees and promoting individual development at both employee and leadership levels.

Organizational identity and meaning of employment remain consistent across the various employee engagement strategies. Yazinski (2009) focused on two-way employer-employee communication (through active communication and mentoring), and employee development and empowerment, thus keeping organizational listening at the forefront of the organizational communication landscape. Amidst the application of contemporary engagement theories in a corporate setting with the Singapore military as a microcosm of the larger context, the following research question is posed to examine the current state:

RQ1: How does the Singapore military engage its employees?

Employee Engagement and Technology Use

Broadened network bandwidths and advanced smartphones have encouraged the use of text applications that allow for multiparty conversations and sharing of rich media. Extant literature has explored its uses for engagement, revealing Gen Y's growing needs for informational and emotional engagement (Trenkov, 2014). With a Gen Y-dominated workforce in the Singapore Military, it is crucial to examine how communication technologies are used for employee engagement, and if they are effective.

Social media has created a borderless user-generated information realm. Its use for organizational relationship building and knowledge sharing is a growing research area (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009), presenting the potential for organizations to utilize social media for communication across various purposes and leverage its multiplier effect to target a wider group. Social media can extrapolate perceived organizational support, community involvement and organizational commitment through its reach, reinforcing perceptions on organizations' openness and responsiveness. Conversely, based on organizational listening, perceptions and information propagated through social media could break employees' affectionate meanings if there is a lack of attention to their expectations, background and values (Lobdell, Sonoda, & Arnold, 1993).

The authority to represent the organization through its social media elevates the employees' statuses. Prestige power (Diga & Kelleher, 2009) engages employees and raises their perceived organizational support when they have "powerful friends" (p. 442) from the management on social media. Perceived organizational support would be further amplified if these "powerful friends" converse with them.

Social media is the platform for corporates to invest (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012) and build up sensing capabilities. Eisenberger, Fasolo, and Davis-LaMastro's (1990) research on the

effect of perceived organizational support on employee motivation at work, commitment, affective attachment and performance-reward expectations reinforced the positive relationship of how employees' perception of being valued by the organization can be translated into intangible outcomes like affective attachments, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment would drive tangible outputs like increased productivity (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Farrell and Rusbult (1981) also found that job satisfaction and commitment correlated with turnover rate. With the theories on employee engagement reviewed and the context of communication technologies introduced, the following question is proposed:

RQ2: How are social media platforms and communication technologies used by the Singapore military for employee engagement?

Communicating the Organization as Employee Engagement

Advanced online technologies provide platforms for public outreach (Curtis, Edwards, Fraser, Gudelsky, Holmquist, Thornton, & Sweetser, 2010). Wright and Hinson (2010) explained how new communications media are being used in public relations and that there is a stronger impetus for non-profit organizations like the military to leverage the potential of social media for their public communication efforts as they need to be prudent in spending unlike profit-driven organizations (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009), which have the capacity to invest in marketing campaigns across various media. Coupled with organizational listening, corporates can have dialogues with their employees on social media (Kent, 2013). Following the evolvement of communication technologies and network capacities, Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) have changed from "coordinating and controlling the various elements of promotional mix to produce a unified customer-focused message" (p.357) to a hybrid of moderating communications among target audience through user-generated content platforms. There is a need for stakeholder differentiation (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011) even with such operational synergy from communication. The "Dual-Capacity" (Sitkin, Sutcliffe, & Barrios-Choplin, 1992, p. 564) of social media messaging, which could be subjectively interpreted by employees and the public is examined in this research. Studies also revealed that electronic communication can lead to difficulties in discerning message tones due to lack of expressions and human interactions (Holden & Wedman, 1993). IMC has internal implications when social media communication meant for public are misconstrued by employees. Bizzi's (2017) study on social media use by employees, whether for work or non-work purposes, further motivates this research to help managers refine social media use as it affects the likelihood of employees' rate of retention.

Through engagement theories, it is possible to theorize that an organization with a strong public standing reinforces its employees' belief in it and the inclination to stay associated, strengthening the organizational commitment of the employees. Hence, the following research question is posed:

RQ3: How does the Singapore military's use of social media for public communication affect employee engagement?

Gauging and Enhancing Employee Engagement

The gauge for the effectiveness of employee engagement strategies should be the level of organizational identity and motivation in employees. An engaged employee is a believer of the organization, driven with desire to work towards making things better, able to see the big picture, respectful and helpful to colleagues, willing to go beyond his scope of work to make things happen, and able to keep himself current with affairs in the scope of his work (Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday, 2004).

Robinson, Perryman, and Hayday (2004) further expounded that “employees rarely move beyond a transactional relationship” (p. 4) with employers and they seek something more from their jobs apart from monetary benefits. These arguments from existing literature further support organizational listening, and show the importance of employee-engagement strategies to resonate with the expectations of employees, and the need to continually strengthen the purpose and meaning of their jobs to keep them engaged (Heise, 2002). Ashforth and Mael (1989) explained that the prestige of being in an organization brings out the desire to stay and the corresponding commitment from employees. Transferring the yardsticks on employee engagement to the context of Singapore’s military, the following research question is proposed:

RQ4: How can the Singapore military enhance its employee engagement strategies?

Methodology

Data was collected from May to August 2016 through interviews with 20 participants from the SAF (see Tables 2 and 3) who were recruited through the primary researcher’s network. Follow-up queries to some interviewees were conducted between December 2016 and January 2017. The first author, an officer in the Air Force during the time of the research, was the sole interviewer in the entire data collection process.

Table 2 Demographics of Interviewees

	Gender		Service			Age Group		
	Male	Female	Air Force	Army	Navy	26-30	31-35	36-40
Current Employee	0	2	3	5	0	1	8	1
Former Employee	10	8	5	4	3	1	4	5
Total	10	10	8	9	3	2	12	6

Table 3 Service Status Breakdown of Interviewees

	Rank			Years of Service		
	Lieutenant	Captain	Major	5-8	9-12	13 and above
Current Employee	0	1	9	1	3	6
Former Employee	1	7	2	3	4	3
Total	1	8	11	4	7	9

Approximately half of the interviews were carried out on a one-to-one and face-to-face 30 to 50-minute sessions, while the remaining were conducted over email to facilitate the convenience of the interviewees and their reticence in disclosing information face-to-face (Meho, 2006). Email interviews provide an asynchronous approach to circumvent conventional challenges of face-to-face interviews using modern efficiencies offered by the internet (Hooley, Wellens, & Marriott, 2012).

Interview questions were carefully crafted to reduce ambiguity, with provisions to inject comments and prevent misinterpretation (Kim, Brenner, Liang, & Asay, 2003) to accommodate asynchronous approaches like email interviews. To ensure that the respondents — those who were still employed and those who had left the Singapore military during the time of the interview — answered the research questions (RQ) (Bradburn, Sudman, & Wansink, 2004), two sets of interview questions were designed based on the RQs. In RQ2, which asks how the Singapore military uses social media and communication technologies for employee engagement, interviewees were asked directly if the SAF was doing so and how it had worked out. Former employees were asked to compare what they saw from the SAF in the past and what they were currently seeing in their workplace outside the SAF. To prevent limiting the interviewees when referring to social media or social networking sites (SNS), no specific SNS was mentioned in the interview questions. The questions were, instead, designed to allow interviewees to share their thoughts on the various SNS used for communication by the SAF and if there was a dominant one. Additionally, the diverse demographics of the interviewees and the allowances for interviewees to review their transcripts reduce the bias of this research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017; Norris, 1997) when the findings are verified with existing literature through triangulation (Yin, 2014).

Qualitative analysis of the 89-page compilation of interview transcripts thematically drew up key features and thick descriptions of the data (Burnard, 1991; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Open coding, axial coding and integration helped identify corresponding themes (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013) out of the 83 initial codes generated. The result is a five-phase thematic analysis process (see Table 4) adapted from Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis guide.

Table 4 Five-Phase Thematic Analysis Process Used in this Study

Phase	Description of Process
1 .Familiarizing with the data	Use of transcribing process to note down initial ideas Read and re-read data to identify ideas
2 .Generating initial codes	Interesting data were highlighted in a systematic way Data collated and comments tagged
3 .Defining and naming interpretive codes for entire data set into themes	Collate codes into possible themes with close reference to RQs; gathered relevant data to each possible theme
4 .Identifying patterns across all data to derive themes for data set	Cross-check if themes worked in relation to the codes and generate a thematic map of the analysis to address the key areas identified by the RQs
5 .Defining and naming themes	Themes are being refined as the coding process continues

Adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2006

Findings

For the first research question on SAF's employee engagement strategies, interviewees disclosed that they generally look beyond tangible benefits such as salaries and bonuses. Interviewees revealed the tenuous efforts by the SAF to keep employees engaged at work with intangible benefits like public support, recognition, developmental opportunities and job engagement.

With the job being 24/7, involving large-scale people management, and protection of human lives in some cases, many cited their job nature as a key engagement factor:

“Strangely, it’s the nature of the work, particularly the strategic element of all my work so far. I believe I was fortunate enough to be exposed to this aspect and more than often, the fact that all my work directly or indirectly contributes to a larger piece of the ‘puzzle’ motivates me and keeps me engaged at work.” (A Navy interviewee with 12 years of experience in the SAF)

There are inherent problems of effective engagement in the military with its large employee population. Mentoring was commonly mentioned by interviewees when asked how SAF engaged them:

“Through mentorship programs and engagement from direct superiors... they were effective. But I think the organization can do more.” (An interviewee who left the

Army after serving for 14 years)

From the lens of organizational listening, the interviews revealed that they were looking for *Recognition, Acknowledgement, and Attention* in the communication strategies adopted by their employers.

The second research question looked at how the Singapore military used social media platforms and communication technologies to engage its employees. Specifically, emails and text messaging were used in daily communication alongside social media, which was perceived as a mass communication tool. Interviewees mentioned the timeliness of social media updates as a key feature of an information dissemination tool while the interviews revealed that there were security concerns when sharing military-related information on social media, and that internal networks provide platforms for secure communication. However, the use of social media by the SAF to share human interest stories, was perceived as an enhancement to its image. Interviewees noted the advantage of social media in its vast reach and rapid information dissemination, and highlighted its use as indirect communication or as a ‘listening’ tool for senior officers who read social media posts and look into issues based on staff’s grouses online.

Despite the change in the approach from routine orders in the past to visually appealing electronic content shared via the internal email system, emails were not regarded as a boost to employee engagement or in building stronger relationships. Instead face- to- face communication was seen as more effective as employees could identify with the social presence and respond to non-verbal cues. Engagement approaches should consider employees’ emotional and social expectations. The feedback quality, or lack thereof, could affect the conversational and engagement quality.

Text messages and group chats, especially WhatsApp, were brought up as a form of technology used for employee engagement. An interviewee said:

“ In the case of WhatsApp groups, I find them extremely useful to disseminate information that can help us to be more effective working as a group. Off office hours, WhatsApp can also be used to share informal topics with one another, which can actually help to foster relationships.” (An Army interviewee with 15 years of experience in the SAF)

From the lens of organizational listening, the interviews uncovered the communication needs of employees when technologies are used. Specifically, they were looking for *Acknowledgement, Understanding, Attention, Consideration and Response* in the communications with their employers even through the use of communication technologies like text messages and social media.

For the third research question, the Singapore military’s use of social media for public communication was regarded by interviewees as a double-edged sword as staff could be confused with the messaging if internal communication was perceived to contradict with public communication. Facebook was cited as SAF’s most prominent communication platform, due

to its high penetration rate and large followership which appeal to the military's publics. Interviewees felt that there was a need to sustain or enhance efforts for coordinated messaging and continuity across various platforms to ensure target audiences get the same message. An interviewee said:

“... This is especially so when the military uses so many social media platforms to reach out to the different audiences, but the messages across the platforms appear to be coordinated and consistent. The services share the Minister's posts, while catchy posts from the services get shared by the Minister or the other services. At least that does not confuse the audience when different pages say different stuff.”

(A Navy interviewee with 11 years of experience in the SAF)

With decentralized management of communication campaigns across the services in SAF as detailed in the background section, it is evident that organizational communication should remain coordinated and consistent across platforms in order to achieve the desired outcome. This research does not delve into the characteristics of each platform, but it notes that different platforms create different challenges and opportunities. For example, the interface on Twitter only allows a 140-character post. This attracts people on the move and in need of quick information.

Messages for the public might be misconstrued by employees if internal communication is not carried out beforehand. Most interviewees responded that chances of misinterpretation are significantly lowered due to information security policies, which prohibit unauthorized sharing of classified information in public spaces. SAF's stringent informational policy and tight internal communication were found to segregate its target audiences. Most agreed that SAF's social media use is meant for public communication, while employees are engaged through internal channels. SAF's coordinated communication approach across channels is important for its image despite decentralized execution of public communications across its services. IMC hence extends beyond the commercial context to organizational communication.

Through the lens of organizational listening, employees appeared to look out for *Interpretation*, *Understanding* and *Consideration* in the way their organization communicates in the public space. This is especially so when public communication might be misinterpreted or confused with internal communication when it is not carried out timely and effectively.

The final research question examines how the Singapore military can enhance its employee engagement strategies with the other findings for this research. The interviews revealed the recognized potential of social media for open employee engagement while interviewees hoped for expanded avenues for recognition and improved quality of communication through personal touch.

Almost all interviewees mentioned surveys as an employee engagement measuring tool, although they were divided on its effectiveness. Routine interviews, face-to-face sessions and 'annual appraisals', referring to mentorship of a supervisor listening to employees' feedback and providing career or personal advice were also cited as measures. When asked about the types of effectiveness measures for employee engagement in the military, an interviewee said:

“Not that I am aware of. Maybe this meant the lack of feedback? Or perhaps it was through the annual appraisal of the individuals which these feedbacks were collected.”
(An interviewee who left the Air Force after serving for 11 years)

This alluded to employees being unaware of the effectiveness and if specific intent of the measurements was shared with them.

Interviewees generally hoped for improvements in employee engagement through better recognition of their work. An interviewee said:

“... I would think that it should be recognition and progression. We can slog so much at work, but in the end, it’s the recognition from the bosses and the public that spurs us on. Progression is part of recognition. Or maybe a result of recognition. I think that it is important to fuel the guys on.” (An interviewee who left the Air Force after serving for 10 years)

Interviewees revealed that human interest stories lent credence to employee recognition. They commented that communication technologies lacked the personal touch:

“They do not help in engagement in the way they are used now. There is no personal conversation or (there is a) lack of personal touch.” (A Navy interviewee with 11 years of experience in the SAF)

From the interviews, it showed that the Singapore military could enhance its employee engagement effectiveness measures beyond surveys and mentoring programs. Recognition and personal touch resonate well with employees and should be enhanced when communicating with employees. Additionally, organizations should tap the potential of social media and the principles of organizational listening to enhance employee engagement due to social media’s deep penetration and wide acceptance, and the evident need for pointed organizational communication.

Discussion

Effective Organizational Listening Enhances Sense of Identity and Commitment in Employees

Active listening and effective organizational communication bring about strong sense of identity and purpose, which positively shape employee engagement outcomes (Macnamara, 2016). This research supports the arguments by Macnamara (2016) as the interviews have reinforced the need for stronger sense of identity and purpose as the pillars to shape employee engagement. The broader strategies guiding these tactical approaches are deliberate instillation of job purpose, providing active listening and feedback opportunities (Macnamara, 2016), and

improving job satisfaction through mediation of contributing factors (Farrell & Rusbult, 1981). It is apparent that employees look for open communication with supervisors who listen and are responsive to their professional and emotional needs (Penna, 2007), and an organization that values their contributions (Helms & Haynes, 1992).

The Singapore military engages its employees through intangible benefits like developmental opportunities and job engagement. On formal or informal face-to-face engagement sessions, many interviewees recalled their experiences and preference for engagements over a meal or drinking session at the bar. Interviewees noted that face-to-face communication with senior officers and mentoring sessions were used as employee engagement strategies, which maintain social relationships in work communication and provide non-verbal cues to indicate “mutual attention and responsiveness” (Lindzey, Gilbert, & Fiske, 1998, p. 167), thereby enhancing the sense of being valued and involved. Fulfilling the *Recognition, Acknowledgement*, and *Attention* tenets of organizational listening, the effectiveness of this approach is amplified when the communicator is in the position of authority. Perceived organizational support is attained when face-to-face communication with supervisors is deemed as representing the organization (Diga & Kelleher, 2009), thereby maintaining affective meanings that the organization is paying attention to them. It is apparent that the tenets of organizational listening support the perceived sense of value and involvement, which employees look for, and can help organizations shape employee engagement outcomes.

Advanced Communication Technologies Extrapolate Effects of Employee Engagement

Social media platforms and communication technologies can extrapolate the effects of employee engagement and extend social cues and involvement necessary for engagement (Bolton et al., 2013) as seen in this study. Social media continues to be an indirect employee engagement tool when the public, including the loved ones of military employees, are told human interest stories of military personnel and can empathize with the challenges at work (Beyer & Figenschou, 2014). Perceived organizational support is enhanced when the public standing and reputation of the organization improve due to its communication efforts. Job satisfaction and organizational commitment are raised when the sense of purpose is strengthened with the increased understanding by the public and loved ones (Men, 2012). Social media, with its speed of information diffusion and reach across extensive networks, has the potential to amplify engagement initiatives and communication tactics by the organizations albeit with the lack of social cues seen in face-to-face communication (Bizzi, 2017; Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 1984).

Internal networks allow sharing of classified information, creating a sense of involvement and inclusiveness, and strengthening employees' organizational commitment (Ellison, Gibbs, & Weber, 2015). This study extended the definition of perceived organizational support to include

organizations giving employees the perception of fulfilling careers, addressing employees' remunerative expectations, and displaying concern for their development and progress. Although earlier studies had discussed the effects of perceived organizational support, the means of cultivating perceived organizational support particularly in a social-mediated environment have not been extensively researched. Perceived organizational support is crucial in the Gen Y-dominated workforce as their use of social media extend towards the formation and maintenance of social capital (Bolton et al., 2013) including social identities, which are molded by what others or their organizations communicate on social media (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009). Organizational listening through social media hence enables the better understanding of employees' communication needs to enrich dialogic conversations.

The current communication landscape continues to embrace the association and membership of employees with organizations (Turban & Greening, 1997). It is especially the case when the organizational standing as a result of its reputation has an influence on the organizational commitment of its employees, whether or not it is an outcome of its communication efforts. Turban and Greening (1997) argued that Corporate Social Performance has an impact on the organizational attractiveness to employees or prospective employees.

As email is asynchronous in nature, employees in the Singapore military do not see it as an employee engagement tool; instead, they signal the need for social cues and involvement in dialogues. Employees' perception of the capability of Web 2.0 in offering interactivity and user-generated content signify the demand for synchronous communication for employee engagement. Research have also supported the argument that emails add to work stress, and email overload causes work disengagement (Kushlev & Dunn, 2015; Reinke & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2014). The findings show employees wanting more social involvement in organizational communication, in line with what organizational listening bolsters. Text messaging was preferred, allowing for group chats and sharing of rich media, resonating with the tenets of *Acknowledgement*, *Understanding*, *Attention*, *Consideration* and *Response* from organizational listening.

For the military to tap into communication technologies for employee engagement it should be cognizant of the platform limitations as mentioned in this research, and adapt based on the characteristics of each platform. Emailing within the official network allows for work distribution and official communication with senior officers. It is a one-way communication that does not provide the social cues required in a fruitful two-way communication for employee engagement. Text messaging applications, however, allow for quick dissemination of information in formal or informal ways (MacCormick, Dery, & Kolb, 2012). Due to the capabilities of such applications that allow for interactive conversations by multiple parties, text messaging applications have become an everyday tool that redefines social involvement further to exclude face-to-face and voice communication (Bittman, Brown, & Wajcman, 2009;

Holden & Wedman, 1993). The results reinforce the research findings by Gachago, Strydom, Hanekom, Simons, and Walters (2015) that text messaging applications like WhatsApp can keep conversations informal, light-hearted and friendly, build trust and allow introvert members to open up for engagement. The technology is however limited by its security protocols, whereby military employees will not be able to share classified information.

With the ubiquity of social media as a communication tool comes the risk of cyberattacks and data breach. Like any organizations, the SAF has adopted security measures such as the setting up of the Defence Cyber Organization (DCO) that differentiates its internal networks from its external platforms to protect itself from cyber threats (MINDEF, 2018a). At the same time, it was found that recruits who have an aptitude in information technology are given opportunities to focus on cyber-related operations during their two-year stint (MINDEF, 2018b), working alongside professional cyber security specialists.

Text messaging applications are deemed most appropriate in the Gen Y-dominated era for dissemination of non-work information and the building of informal relationships and friendships. It is hence important to discern between professional engagements and non-work engagements, where social cues remain crucial for the former.

Coherent Communications across Platforms Bolster Engagement

As social media is a public platform, it inevitably invites the question if miscommunication or misinterpretation could occur when engaging employees in the public domain. Chances of misinterpretation for the SAF are low due to information security policies, which prohibit unauthorized sharing of classified information in public spaces. SAF's stringent informational policy and tight internal communication were found to segregate its target audiences. Interviewees agreed that SAF's social media use is meant for public communication, while employees are engaged through internal channels or enterprise networks. SAF's coordinated communication approach across channels is important for its image, supporting the argument that IMC extends beyond the commercial context.

Facebook, cited by the interviewees as SAF's most prominent communication platform, is suitable for the military's publics as it has a high penetration rate and large followership (Waters et al., 2009). Apart from being updated on SAF's developments, users can share information and stay connected via Facebook. With various communication approaches adopted, it is important for coordinated messaging and continuity across various platforms to ensure target audiences get the same message (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011).

For organizations to retain employees, there needs to be consistent engagement through communication and display of concern through deliberate planning of development opportunities for the employees (Wang & Hsieh, 2013). IMC, which is applicable in employee

engagement in this highly-networked era has moved towards being coordinated audience-focused messaging instead of just coordinating marketing approaches (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The perceived organizational support by employees is a cause for concern when designing employee engagement strategies as there is a need for organizations to bring the tacit engagement tactic of employee development towards explicit communication for effective outcome. The interviews revealed that employee engagement efforts have a significant impact on retention. Former employees interviewed said that effective communication and engagement at work could have prevented their turnover, and that most of them lacked the sense of purpose they desired during their service. Organizations need to deliberately chart their communication strategies and ensure coherence and consistency in their engagement of employees to enhance perceived organizational support and raise the sense of purpose in employees (Wang & Hsieh, 2013).

Leverage Social Media to Improve Quality of Communication in Employee Engagement

The Singapore military should enhance its employee engagement by refining its feedback mechanism to measure employee engagement tactics, expand avenues to recognize employees, add personal touch to its communication with employees (Heise, 2002), and leverage social media to deepen its communication with employees (Bizzi, 2017; Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012). Social media can improve the quality of communication for employee engagement through human interest stories, bolstering of public support, and social media dialogues between employees and superiors. This study showed that employees are increasingly looking for such engagement on social media.

From the human resource management perspective, leaders and managers should be cognizant of the potential social media offers in the efforts to engage and listen to employees. This is especially the case when the communication behaviors of employees have shifted towards social media instead of the former face-to-face communication efforts. Leaders and managers must be able to sense ground sentiments with social media, listening for pointed and timely internal communications. When communications are deepened, the corresponding team synergies can bring about greater efficiencies which elevates the organization.

Contrary to common beliefs, the military setting reflects the corporate employee environment. The Gen Y-dominated workforce blurs the divide between military and corporate, as evident in the rising informational and emotional demands (Yeaton, 2008) by SAF employees. Interviewees asked for stronger meaning and purpose-building in employee engagement communication. The findings across both former and current employees (representing corporate and military) present the potential of employee engagement strategies to be transferred across military and corporate organizations, thereby raising the values of managers who are in-tuned with the use of social media for employee engagement.

Research findings indicate that perceived organizational engagement boosts retention statistics (Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990; Lloyd et al., 2015; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Meaningful jobs motivate individuals to continue identifying with the organization (Tsui *et al.*, 1997). Such findings are transferable to the corporate world as the military is a microcosm of the corporate setting.

Conclusion

Complex relationships between various factors driving employee engagement and the effects of employee engagement are condensed within this research. Engagement theories argued that organizations should show respect for their stakeholders while valuing their contributions. Amidst the social-mediated environment, the findings from this research revealed that timely employee engagement could prevent turnover. Social media should be leveraged as a key platform to communicate timely with the Gen Y workforce in a coordinated, consistent, deliberate and strategic approach. In this age of social media, organizational listening assumes heightened importance. Organizational listening fills the gap the SAF and many organizations have in internal communications. Employees feel proud when the organizations showcase good work on social media or public domains. The enhancement of social media organizational communication through listening should continue as the communication behaviors of employees shift towards passive and indirect communication on social media instead of the predominant direct and face-to-face communication in the past. Social media use by organizations for employee engagement should, when possible, be complemented by face-to-face interactions with organization leaders. This is a form of letting employees feel valued, which is the key driver for employee retention.

Findings showed that military regimentation has minimal effect on employees' perceptions (Bray, Marsden, & Peterson, 1991), hinting applicability in commercial organizations. Even with information security concerns in the military, the use of social media goes beyond enhancing public opinions and reinforcing employees' sense of purpose when internal communication is well-coordinated, consistent, deliberate and strategic.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The sample size of 20 interviewees provided sufficient substantive data without reaching saturation point where new data gathered would not further develop research findings (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007). As with all qualitative studies, the findings from this study is not generalizable to the overall population or specific samples even when generalization at the conceptual level, or to theories, is supported (Yin, 2014). Further study could consider a larger number of participants, and a quantitative approach for generalizable results. While current and former employees of the Singapore military provided a suitable sample size for this study, future research referring to this study should be cognizant of the cultural factors surrounding the SAF. This research on social media potential was also limited to Facebook, which future research could explore further on other platforms for their potential

in organizational communication.

This study hopes to inspire future research on social media for military employee engagement. It also invites consideration of corporate-centric employee engagement theories and strategies for the military or vice versa. Future researchers could consider replicating this in another country's military.

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